

Chapter 4

Tracing The Evolution of Goddess Worship in Ancient India

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Abstract

In India the worship of the goddess goes back to the pre-Aryan times, before 1500 BCE. The sites of Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa and other parts of the Indus Valley Civilization, have yielded hundreds of female figures dating as far back as the third millennium BCE. However, goddess figures feature minimally in the early Vedic/ Aryan literature. By the classical era, both the great gods, Vishnu and Shiva are believed to have had female consorts. During the 6th-8th centuries, some Hindus within the Shaivite tradition elevated the divine female form to being the consort, to the great goddess, so the goddess now enjoyed the position of Supreme Being in her own right. It was therefore now possible to worship the goddess as the Supreme Being, who is herself the Creator, Preserver and the Destroyer.

Since the reappearance of the goddess in India, she has grown in strength and popularity and is worshipped by many names and in many places today. This paper discusses the popularity and significance of the goddess/Mother worship cult which has grown in India over the past several centuries. In recognizing this seamless cycle of creation, nourishment and dissolution embodied by the goddess, we find the very

foundations of the fertility cults whose continuities can be traced back to the 7th century BCE.

Introduction

In India the worship of the goddess goes back to the pre-Aryan times, before 1500 BCE. The sites of Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa and other parts of the Indus Valley Civilization, have yielded hundreds of female figures dating as far back as the third millennium BCE. However, goddess figures feature minimally in the early Vedic/Aryan literature. Usha, the goddess of Dawn, has only twenty hymns in the Rig Veda, and although she is one of the most important goddesses, she is not on a par with the most important gods, e.g., Agni, Indra and Soma. Other goddesses, such as Prithvi, Aditi and Saraswati are mentioned in the Vedas, but none of the goddesses who became very important in Brahmanical Hinduism, such as Parvati, Durga, Kali, Radha and Sita are mentioned in the Vedas. By the classical era, both the great gods, Vishnu and Shiva are believed to have had female consorts, but with the coming of the Aryans, there is not much evidence of the worship of the goddesses. During the 6th-8th centuries, some Hindus within the Shaivite tradition elevated the divine female form to being the consort, to the great goddess, so the goddess now enjoyed the position of Supreme Being in her own right. It was therefore now possible to worship the goddess as the Supreme Being, who is herself the Creator, Preserver and the Destroyer.

Since the reappearance of the goddess in India, she has grown in strength and popularity and is worshipped by many names and in many places today. The goddess/Mother worship cult which has grown in India over the past several centuries is predominantly centered around Parvati, the consort of Shiva. In fact, the goddess finds a natural home within Shaivism,

where she is seen as the personification of the female energy (Shakti) of the more passive, contemplative Shiva.

The popularity and widespread nature of the goddess worship is almost certainly attributable to the powerful and clearly observable role of the human mother, who bears new offspring from her body and nourishes and nurtures these; and to the transference of this imagery to the Fertile Earth (Mother) who also produces and nourishes life, and finally, at death, takes it back into her dark womb. Thus, the Mother Goddess represents both the life-giving, nurturing processes and the related processes of disintegration, death and decay. Margaret Stutley states that Shakti is the overflowing cosmic energy through which gods, worlds and all creatures come into being. In fact, she is indistinguishable from Nature (prakriti). Yet even in her fierce aspect, she protects those of her children who can overcome their fears and terrors of the inevitable process of continuous change and decay she represents, to see her transcendent beauty and the eternal bliss that ultimately, she bestows on her worshippers.

Thus, in recognizing this seamless cycle of creation, nourishment and dissolution embodied by the goddess, we find the very foundations of the fertility cults whose continuities can be traced up to the 7th century BCE.

I

Religious practices in the Harappan period appears to have centered largely on the deities associated with fertility, creation and the forces of nature. Various pieces of evidence of female figurines have been found by archaeologists and historians who have accepted this fact. Although no specific names can be given to these since the script has not been deciphered yet, scholars have suggested that the figurines so found were somehow related to the cult of the “Mother

Goddess.” For example, the numerous female figurines found across Harappan sites (Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Banawali) are generally interpreted by scholars as representations of a single, overarching Mother Goddess or Earth Goddess. This deity is associated with motherhood, fertility, procreation, and the continuity of life, which were important for an agricultural society.

At Inamgaon, an interesting discovery was made under a house floor belonging to the Period II of the Jorwe phase. It was a headless female figurine with a bull. All the other figurines which were found, were similarly unbaked, showing that they were made for temporary use. The headless figurine had a hole in its abdomen, and the bull had a hole in its back. So, when a stick was inserted through both the holes, the headless figurine was found to sit perfectly on the bull’s back! The most important fact to note here is that, the figurines were found buried under a house floor, which suggests that they were a part of an important household ritual. Upinder Singh¹ suggests that it could have been a Goddess which represented fertility, childbirth or the welfare of children.

During the Early Vedic period, we see the coming of Gods and Goddesses having prominent names. However, the particular physical forms attributed to them served symbolic purposes, reflecting their functions and influence over the natural world. The prominent Goddesses which were worshipped during this period include: Aditi, Usha, Saraswati, Prithvi, Ratri, Ila, Nirrti. All these Goddesses find their mention in the Rig Veda. N.N. Bhattacharya in his book mentions that, in some of the Upanishads, it has been found that the names Kara, Karali etc. were used as the names of different kinds of flames and, in the White Yajus Samhita, we find Ambika spoken of

¹Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, India, 2016).

as the sister of Rudra. However, when Rudra assumed a more distinct individuality in the Puranas, all those names were construed as the different names of his wife!

One important and interesting thing to note here is that, these goddesses had their own independent identities, which got reversed during the Later Vedic Period, having the independent female goddesses being turned into consorts of the main male gods' pantheon.

During the pre-Mauryan and Mauryan period, Brahmanical religion faced its major blow due to the rise of other heterogeneous religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivikas etc. It was only during the post-Mauryan period that Brahmanism was revived again.²

The period between c.200 BCE-300 CE, was the formative phase in the evolution of early Hindu pantheons. All the earliest inscriptional references and archaeological remains of the Hindu temples belong to this period. Some of the deities who became the foci of worship in this period are known from the Vedic literature. However, during these centuries, they emerged as the foci of devotion, as powerful supreme deities, whose images were installed and worshipped in temples and homes. Upinder Singh, in her book "A History of Ancient and Early medieval India", mentions that stone and terracotta sculptures from sites and such as Mathura clearly indicate that the popular cults of the Yakshas and Yakshis, nagas and naganis were gradually being pushed to the margins by the gods and goddesses of the Brahmanical tradition. The most influential of the newly emerging cults were associated with the worship of the gods Shiva and Vishnu and the goddess Durga.³

²N.N. Bhattacharya, *The Indian Mother Goddess* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1972).

The age of the Imperial Guptas, which covers the fourth, fifth and the first half of the sixth century of the Christian era, presents a religious canvas of complex vertical and horizontal relationships. One segment of this shows the Vedic rituals and gods standing at the highest point of diverse Brahmanical religious systems which run in horizontal relationship with one another. The non-Brahmanical systems are similarly shown in horizontal relationship with one another, but devoid of the Vedic vertex, and running competitively parallel to the Brahmanical ones sharing in the new options provided by the popular element of folk and local cults involving. During this period, it was seen that, most of the deities were merged together. For example, Ambika, Uma/Gauri and Shri/Lakshmi were merged together and made the manifestations of goddess Durga. Even the other Vedic goddesses such as Usha, Ratri, although not directly “merged” into the specific iconography or mythology of the goddess Durga, had their attributes and the general concept of the divine feminine (Shakti) integrated into the broader Hindu pantheon, which contributed to the rise of the prominent goddesses like Durga in later traditions. Even the cults of Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti, came to be prominent during this period. Probably the most important development which took place in this period was the writing of the text called the *Devi Mahatmya* or *Durga Saptashati*, by Sage Markandeya, which is a key text in Shaktism that glorifies Durga as the supreme goddess and details her victory over Mahishasura. This text was instrumental in providing a theological basis for viewing other goddesses as aspects of her being.

However, it has been noted in D.D. Kosambi’s “Myth and Reality” that the Goddess Durga has ancient roots in

³Kuiper, F. B. J. “The Basic Concept of Vedic Religion.” *History of Religions* 15, no. 2 (1975): 107–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1061926>.

prehistoric Mother Goddess and fertility cults. Although today she is known as a powerful warrior goddess, her origins are intrinsically linked to earlier deities associated with fertility, agriculture and life cycles. This even finds its mention in Kautilya's Arthashastra, where the Devi is referred to as the spirit of vegetables, in connection to the sowing of seeds, highlighting an association with the agricultural abundance.⁴

The religious developments during the period 6th-13th century CE, shows continuities with the preceding centuries, according to Upinder Singh. At the level of popular worship, the focus was on the devotional worship in temples and on the pilgrimage. The Hindu cults, especially those associated with the worship of Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti, became increasingly popular.

An important development during this period was the composition of the Shakta text, which was composed in the area of Assam or in the adjoining part of Bengal. It reflects the diverse forms of the worship of Devi. The goddess is described as having both a benign and a terrifying form. In her Shanta (calm) form she has a strongly erotic character. In her Rudra manifestation, she is best worshipped in a cremation ground.

II

The village or folk tradition in India, centred on the worship of predominantly female deities, almost certainly has roots reaching back to pre-Aryan times (Whitehead 1988: 11, 17). Although this tradition differs in many respects from the Brahmanical or "great" tradition of goddess worship, it also shares deep continuities. Unlike the Brahmanical goddesses, who have pan-Indian appeal, the village or guardian goddesses (gramadevatas) are linked to specific

⁴Atre, Shubhangana. "THE FEMININE AS ARCHETYPE." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 92 (2011): 151-93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43941279>.

localities and are worshipped primarily by the inhabitants of a single village. Some villages may house more than one such deity, with certain goddesses remaining completely unknown outside their locality. Others, however, have acquired broader regional influence—such as Manasā in eastern India and Mariyamman in the South. As scholars like Alaka Malwade Basu noted, cultural differences shaped the way communities understood these deities: for many South Indians, Mariyamman was functionally equivalent to Śītālā in the North.

The name “Mari-amman” itself reflects the goddess’s ambiguous nature. The word mari can mean both “death” in Sanskrit and “rain” in Tamil, suggesting her power over both destructive disease and life-giving fertility (Beck 1969: 571). Ethnographer Brenda E. F. Beck also notes that she is sometimes called Paccaiyamman, the “green goddess,” a colour associated with rain and vegetation. Even today, despite the decline of smallpox and similar epidemics, many village, folk, and tribal communities continue to celebrate an annual festival for Mariyamman. This usually occurs in the Tamil month of Ādi (July–August), historically associated with seasonal outbreaks of fever and disease. Ādi is considered inauspicious; marriages, new business ventures, and even childbirths are avoided. Children conceived or born in this month are sometimes regarded as unlucky, marking the enduring cultural weight of the goddess’s influence.⁵

Goddess Manasā, the serpent deity, remains an important object of popular worship in Bengal and neighbouring regions. Like other folk goddesses such as Śītālā and Śasthī, she was originally worshipped by tribal or “primitive” groups before gradually entering orthodox Hinduism. Her name appears

⁵Kochar, V. K. “Village Deities of the Santal and Associated Rituals.” *Anthropos* 61, no. 1/2 (1966): 241–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40458237>.

only in later Purānas—the Padma, Bhagavata, and Brahma Vaivarta—and scholars like A. Bhattacharyya argue that large parts of eastern India and the Deccan retained significant pre-Aryan cultural features, including Śakti worship. This, he suggests, explains why the anthropomorphic serpent goddess is found primarily in Bengal, Bihar, Assam, and parts of the South. Manasā is especially prevalent in rural Bengal among communities traditionally considered lower in social hierarchy, including Hinduised aboriginal groups such as the Dom, Bauri, Keot, Mai, and Bagdi. In places like Birbhum district, there is hardly any village where her worship is not performed.

Village goddesses serve diverse functions. Brubaker (1983:148) notes that some preside over marriage, conception, or childbirth; others promote agricultural fertility; some protect herds, wells, granaries, and village boundaries; still others exorcise ghosts, prevent snakebite, or cure specific diseases. Their festivals often involve highly charged ritual activity—“overheating” or even chaotic—which mirrors the community’s struggle against epidemics. The collective energy of the ritual is seen as a symbolic attempt to expel disease, much like the body fighting an infection.

Mariamman is often depicted holding fire pots. Vessel symbolism is widespread and ancient, appearing in goddess worship across cultures. Many ritual pots have been shaped like women or designed with female faces. Erich Neumann sees the vessel as the central symbol of the feminine—the “life vessel” that protects, nurtures, and gives birth (1963: 42, 120). Drawing on G. E. Smith, he argues that the “Mother Pot” is a universal religious motif, deeply rooted in ancient belief. Briffault similarly notes the presence of pot-shaped goddesses in South India.

The colour red plays an important symbolic role in the imagery of Hindu goddesses. Many are clothed in red or painted with red pigments. This colour represents blood and therefore reflects both the life-giving and destructive powers of the goddess. It symbolizes menstruation, fertility, childbirth, and the blood of sacrifice (Neumann 1963: 279). While worshippers may not consciously interpret these symbols, they preserve them across generations because these rituals continue to satisfy fundamental emotional and social needs.

South Indian village goddesses typically have male guardian deities whose images stand outside their shrines. These male attendants protect the goddess and carry out her commands but remain subordinate and servile (Whitehead 1988: 18). One prominent example is Kattavarayan, known across many Mariyamman shrines; his name means “guardian king,” from *ka*, meaning “to protect.”

In Bengal, mother-goddess cults have attracted extensive anthropological attention.⁶ Scholars such as Ralph Nicholas and Das Gupta have linked these village-level practices to themes like epidemic control and the social mobility of rural groups such as the Mahishyas. Nicholas famously remarked that “Mother herself is a person to be worshipped in Bengal,” reflecting the deep reverence given to motherhood in regional culture. Among Vedic goddesses, Das Gupta highlights Prithvī, the earth-mother, as especially relevant to Bengal. Later texts identify Prithvī with Śrī or Laksmī, the goddess of harvest and prosperity. Prithvī is symbolically paired with Dyans (the sky) as the “field” to be inseminated by seed, reflecting agricultural metaphors of fertility (Leela Dube). During the Ambabachi ritual, Bengali cultivators treat the

⁶Bagchi, Jasodhara. “Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 42/43 (1990): WS65–71. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4396894>.

earth as menstruating; ploughing and even cooking are restricted so as not to “disturb” the mother earth.

Durga worship, Bengal’s most important autumn festival, lasts about four days. Das Gupta suggests that it likely developed as a merging of the fierce goddess Durga with the earth goddess. This association with agricultural prosperity strengthened the worship of Śakti—the feminine principle—across social classes, despite limited sanction in the male-dominated Vedic pantheon. Over time, Shakti worship became deeply embedded in Bengali cultural and religious life, and it played an important role in nationalist symbolism as well.

Many forms of the mother goddess, including the Mahavidyas, originally belonged to diverse folk cultures and social groups. Between the first and tenth centuries CE, these various local goddesses were gradually integrated into the concept of a single universal mother (Das Gupta 1977: 72). In Parvati legends, traits such as sexuality, nourishment, and headlessness are common. Similar themes appear in the concepts of Śrī and Laksmī.⁷

Sexuality and fertility are strongly associated in many tribal traditions. The outstretched-leg or semi-squatting posture seen in tribal art—for example, in the youth dormitory (gotal) paintings of the Muria of Bastar—signals sexual readiness and fertility (Elwin 1998: 36). Tribal groups such as the Oraon, Santal, and Munda also link sexuality with agricultural fertility (Bagchi 1980: 162–163). Many village fertility goddesses combine these elements, embodying both sexual and vegetative symbolism. This logic appears widely in Indian art, where erotic imagery merges with fertility motifs (Lannoy 1971: 41–42).

⁷MISHRA, BABA, PRADEEP MOHANTY, and P. K. MOHANTY. “HEADLESS CONTOUR IN THE ART TRADITION OF ORISSA, EASTERN INDIA.” *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute* 62/63 (2002): 311–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42930626>

The goddess Śrī, associated with farmers and vegetation, possessed strong connections to sexuality and nourishment. She was assimilated with Laksmī, Prithvī, Śasthī, Rākā, Jaya, and other goddesses before the first century CE (Gonda 1900: 217). Her cult also entered Buddhist tradition, where she appears between two elephants pouring water over her or in personified yoni figurines found at Sanchi, Bharhut, Kosambi, and Bodh Gaya. Śrī was identified with grain in Vedic texts and described as “lotus-headed” in the Purānas, linking her to vegetative fertility.

The headless goddess Lajjā Gaurī embodies the combined aspects of sexuality, fertility, and nourishment. Her iconography often incorporates Śaiva, Śākta, or Vaisnava symbols, showing syncretic development. She appears frequently alongside Saptamatrika figures (Bolon 1986: 51). Scholars like Mishra (2000) argue that Lajjā Gaurī represents an early form of the Durga-Parvati-Laksmī complex. Similar traits appear in other mother-goddess forms such as Chinnamastā and Śākambarī, who also combine headlessness, sexuality, fertility, and the nourishing function.⁸

To conclude, the broader implication of this history is that mother-goddess worship extends back to the beginnings of Indian civilization. From the first century CE onward, numerous local mother goddesses emerged, and although they differed in form, they ultimately converged into the figure of a single universal mother. Daniel Ingalls believes that the worship of the Goddess never really ceased in India. He says: The two-thousand-year silence of the record may be explained by the fact that all our texts from that period are either in Sanskrit or closely related languages, and there is no doubt that the Aryan-Sanskrit culture was strongly oriented toward

⁸Dhavalikar, M. K. “LAJJĀGAURI.” *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute* 39 (1980): 30–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42931321>.

masculine goals . . . The men and women who worshipped the goddess are not likely in that period to have written at all; almost surely, they did not write in Sanskrit. Our earliest Sanskrit hymns to the goddess, according to this view, are the continuation of an old religion, not an innovation.⁹

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